FRONT PORCH SERIES
BROADCAST CALLS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT APPROACH: HOW AND WHY

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Q: If you could talk a little bit more about how you choose things to go on documentation boards. What are they?

A: There are several ways that we do documentation boards in my classroom. I didn't show a picture of it here, but it's in the video and the DVD. At my circle time area, where we would have morning meeting or class meetings, instead of having the weather, and the day of the week, and the calendar and all that, we had what we called our history board. We would put different samples of things that were happening in the life of our project up there. And I would let the children make decisions about what would go up. So, for instance, the drawing of the pliers that I shared with you, the children said, "Let's put a drawing of the pliers up that we drew today." So I would never have a row of all the children's drawings of tools up on the classroom [board]. I would have samples of the different events in the life of our project.

And then toward the end of the project, or as that board becomes more full, we distill it down a little bit, maybe add some typed captions and move some of it out into the hallway so other people can start to know a little bit about what's been going on in our classroom. The actual documentation boards, now, I would do it in PowerPoint. Back when I did that project, I had to actually get the pictures printed, cut them out, glue them on the board. It's much easier now. But we would create a panel or a poster that summarizes some important points, or some important events in the life of the project that show growth in children's learning, or show how that kind of a learning experience works—or create a window on an individual child's development, as in the case of Taylor.

Q: The resources you shared, are there some examples of documentation boards on those two websites?

A: Yes, there are some documentation boards in the book on the car project. Windows on Learning is a book that Dr. Helm, and I, and Kathy Steinheimer did that has lots about documentation, how to do documentation. There's stuff about documentation on the Illinois Projects in Practice website.

Q: Another question came in about how young is too young to work on projects. Is there an age group where you'd say, yes, you could start, and do you make some adaptations for younger children?

A: That's a common question, and I'm delighted to say that you can actually see a project on spinach that is on the Projects in Practice website. That was conducted here at St. Ambrose in our lab school at the children's campus in our infant/toddler room. Yes, you can do project work, but you have to infer the children's interest from things that they pay attention to. So you have to be a really good observer, and then try to provide them with experiences that will satisfy their curiosity. You can see an excellent job of how teachers did that kind of careful observation and provided toddlers with experiences like that, which essentially is project work. They're not going to produce a final project like a car or a cow, but they certainly can investigate an inquiry-based learning.

Q: In Phase 2 you talked about children asking questions. How do you help children who might not know how to ask questions?

A: A lot of times with three- or four-year-olds, if you say, "What questions do you have?" many children don't know what you mean, what you want from them. You can say to them, "What do you want to find out? What do you think we might see if we went to the automotive layout? What would you like to bring back?" Then you can take the statements (oftentimes, it will come out as a statement), and you can rephrase it as question. And I think the more they hear you rephrase their statement into a question, they start to understand how you phrase the question. As educators we can reinforce it when they actually do phrase something as a question by saying things like, "Oh, that's a great question. I'm going to write it here and put a question mark at the end." It's a combination of acknowledging questions that they ask, prompting them to ask questions, modeling how a question is worded.

Q: How would a teacher convince her Head Start administrator, or pre-K administrator to let her use the project approach?

A: Project work produces so many more samples than you can dream of, more than you know what to do with. You don't have look-alike artwork; you have kids producing on their own. So you have these wonderful samples of their work that document what they know and they're able to do. I think if you're a good observer, you know what benchmarks you're trying to meet, or performance indicators. So you're able to document those as you watch children engaged in project work, and provide examples. If you document publically in the hallway or on documentation panels, and you emphasize this is what the children learn, these are the benchmarks that were met, that can be very convincing. Our newsletter—the newsletter that went home to parents or to other teachers—always was about the progress of our project and what the children were learning. We've done things like take a checklist, or take a list of benchmarks, and highlight those that could've been met easily multiple times during the project.

Q: Another question had to do with meeting learning goals and early learning standards. You gave some examples about math and literacy standards, and so someone asked too about children with IEP. Could you talk a little bit about what you've seen around children who really have special needs and how they do in the project approach, as well as typically developing children meeting their learning goals and early learning standards?

A: Inclusion is a goal for many of us. We want children to be fully included, and we want them to interact. Oftentimes, our goals have to do with them interacting with other children. There's so many ways for them to become engaged in activities with other children in project work that it provides a really nice context. If we have in mind the literacy goals, or the math goals, or whatever goals we have for the children, we can find ways to embed them in the project in a social context, so that the child is actively participating in the learning experience. For children who are slow to engage socially, don't really know how to interplay, the fact that the project goes on over an extended period of time, and that we're talking about it so much, provides them with a lot of clues as to how they can enter the play, and what role they might be able to take.

Q: Someone asked about part-time or part-day programs. Is it doable in a part-day classroom?

A: I actually did an article on it ["Implementing the Project Approach in Part-time Early Childhood Education Programs," listed in the Selected Resources]. What I found in the car project, for instance, where children had irregular attendance patterns, was that the project actually made school more coherent. A child who was coming Monday, but wasn't going to be back again until Wednesday or Thursday, actually could come right back into the flow of the classroom because they had an expectation that we were still going to be learning about cars, or working on the car, instead of hopping from one theme or topic to another.

I interviewed teachers after I had trained them, a year later, (teachers who were working in half-day programs) about whether or not they were able to do the project approach with their children. They thought it was actually a benefit. They would have the morning class write letters to the afternoon class. For instance, the morning class was making a grocery store. The morning class would write a letter to the afternoon class and say, "We made the cash register. Could you work on some shelves this afternoon?" So the two classes would write back and forth. Some teachers like to have separate webs for the morning class and the afternoon class, or, some teachers like to combine them into one web. That's up to the individual teacher's discretion.

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